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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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STATE SUPERINTENDENT

April 1, 2013

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Bobbi Jo Kenyon, 2012-2013 Michigan Teacher of the Year

SUBJECT: Teacher of the Year Report

In Grand Rapids
Ottawa Hills High School

Our Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) completed additional Instructional Rounds where we visited other classrooms to gauge where our teachers are in terms of implementation of School Improvement Plan strategies. After gathering data, we met to analyze what we observed and plan any additional professional development needed. We had two teachers from Alger Middle School join us on our rounds. They want to implement this process at their school and will be following our lead. This collaboration also generated conversation around meeting with feeder schools when planning school improvement, implementing protocols, and utilizing instructional strategies. If middle schools are incorporating some of the same initiatives as their high schools, there will not only be an easier transition for students and teachers, but also should account for more student success.

We invited each department at our school to analyze this year's School Improvement Plan (SIP) and give feedback as to what strategies worked, what was lacking, and what should be incorporated into the SIP for next year to keep us moving forward. Having staff input is essential for buy-in and maintaining accountability at a school. Our ILT will be meeting next month to work on the SIP by taking the feedback from teachers and data from student achievement to formulate our plan for next year.

The ILT attended the Michigan Fellowship of Instructional Leaders (MiFIL) Conference in Lansing. The focus was on examination of student work and the use of rubrics. Our school brought samples of student work from various teachers and departments. Rigor, type of questions asked, learning objectives, and student answers were studied in each of the samples. This is the kind of work that needs to be accomplished at departmental Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) each month. By looking at the work we are asking students to do and the quality of our questions and their answers, we can see if we are allowing opportunities for student growth and preparing them to be career- and college-ready.

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The second focus at MiFIL was on the use of rubrics. These tools are a great way to clarify expectations for both staff and students when assessing performance and the quality of student work. It is also an opportunity for teachers to collaborate and focus on high quality instruction. Teams are asked to formulate a plan for the implementation of a rubric that they created for their staff and prepare a presentation that will be given at the next conference.

Instructional Coaches and ILT members at our school developed a writing rubric to be used by all teachers when assigning and grading student writing. After deciding that all teachers need to be consistent with what they were looking for in student writing, we felt this rubric would meet that objective. The three teachers on our ILT will pilot the rubric's use in their classrooms and bring back their findings to the team in May. This way we can modify this tool, if needed, and be able to bring it to our staff next school year. I think it is important to pilot initiatives and to have several teachers demonstrate if a strategy such as this works in their classrooms. When bringing new ideas to the staff, nothing is better than saying, "I tried it, and here is how it worked for me" to get staff buy-in.

Our District

Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) Superintendent Teresa Neal gave the State of the Schools address this month. She opened by thanking the many business and community partners that work with the district, partnerships that are essential to helping our students succeed. She talked about the transformation plan unveiled earlier in the year which includes the tough decision of closing several schools which is necessary for saving money and improving student achievement.

Other topics Superintendent Neal covered were:

- The recruitment of staff from outside the city and state to bring the "best and brightest" into the district, as well as reaching out to the philanthropic community to help with recruitment incentives.
- Improving customer service, an area in which the community felt the district needed improvement. Guidelines have been created for how GRPS employees should conduct themselves as professional and welcoming when answering phones and emails and when greeting visitors.
- A "restorative justice" initiative being launched to help reduce suspensions and improve student behavior while keeping an emphasis on discipline. This plan will also address the number of suspensions of special education students as well as African Americans.
- Asking the legislature to allow the millage dollars that are earmarked for building improvements, to be used to purchase computers, iPads, etc., since providing students with technology and teaching them how to use it is key to the district's academic plan.

Superintendent Neal ended with a reaffirmation of her commitment to help the district move forward by being innovative and focusing on the academic needs of its students as well as working with parents, teachers, and community members to achieve this goal. She stated now is "go time." She also earned praise and a "highly effective" rating from the GRPS Board of Education on her annual review and her contract was extended. Her strengths include leadership, staff and community collaboration, and student achievement. She continues to guide the district on necessary and innovative changes.

In My Classroom

My students just completed a chapter on DNA – its structure, replication, mutations, genetic diseases, and protein synthesis. These are very complicated topics that even college students struggle with, however I was really excited about their scores on the unit assessment! I talked to a teacher several weeks ago who also teaches in an inner city school with the majority of students “at-risk.” She said that she doesn’t get into much detail on these topics as her students just “can’t learn” something like that. I told her that my students were learning it well and she was surprised. I really think this goes back to 1) setting high expectations and believing that all students are capable of learning; 2) helping students build their self-efficacy to believe in themselves; and 3) finding any way to make difficult concepts more accessible to students by using a wide variety of instructional strategies that meet multiple learning modalities. For example, protein synthesis is very complicated to read or listen to a lecture about, but having students actually partake in its process can lead to better understanding.

My students participated in an activity I created where they were in a cell (the classroom) and they had to get the message from the DNA in the nucleus (stuck on a desk in the center of the room) back to the ribosomes where protein synthesis takes place (at their desk). “They” were the mRNA molecules moving the message and the tRNA bringing in the amino acids to make the protein. They also were given a scenario where they had received alien DNA from another planet but did not know what the aliens looked like. They had to take various genes from their DNA and do protein synthesis on them to get traits and then be able to draw their aliens. It allowed them to be creative and actually “see” DNA working in a scenario. Students love activities such as these, and it really helps them to learn concepts. All students CAN learn. The strategies used to present the information, the activities to support it, the formative assessments used to make sure they are learning, and the effort on the student’s part make sure this happens.

As Michigan Teacher of the Year

I was the keynote speaker at the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Fire Up Conference for West Michigan Student Teachers where I spoke to approximately 450 students about my background. The three important things I wanted them to remember as they move forward in their teaching are:

- Passion - always show your love for what you do and the subject you teach. You never know how much you can touch a student.
- Perseverance - teaching is a job that not everyone can do; it is harder than people think. It requires more dedication than most people give to a job, and yet can be the most rewarding. They must remember to not give up, as many teachers drop out of the profession, but to persevere and make the difference that they were meant to make.
- Professional growth – they must always continue to better themselves and find new and innovative ways to teach their students.

I shared an example of passion regarding an email I received from a former student. This student became a doctor and was asked in her class “When did you decide to become a doctor?” She wrote me “I’ve had a lot of time to reflect back on what drove me to medicine and I can trace my inspiration back to your classroom. Your anatomy class was one of the first classes where I felt inspired by a teacher’s passion and that inspiration has meant the world to me.” I let the students there know that “they” will be getting letters like this and

that makes the hard work worth it! I also shared one of my favorite phrases, "great teachers are born AND made." I let them know that I am not the teacher I was 15 years ago or even last year, and I hope to be an even better teacher in the future. They need to constantly grow and become the best teacher they can be, our students deserve it and our future as a nation depends on it!

At the GVSU Fire Up Conference, I also presented a session on ways I use technology in my classroom. I get so excited sharing my ideas and strategies with other teachers, especially pre-service students. I had a great group of students in my session that left excited and ready to try some new ideas!

I was taped in school this month by Colleen Pierson who is starting a series of positive educational stories called "Education First" which will be posted on numerous websites and public access channels. She interviewed me, my colleagues and students, and taped me teaching a class. It was a great experience and wonderful to have the positive highlighted in our schools as every day educators are doing great things!

Superintendent Neal invited me to speak at the State of the Schools. However, I had a previous engagement to speak at Michigan State University, so we decided to videotape my message and then play it during the event. I wanted to talk about the amazing talent and dedication of teachers in our schools along with the positive direction our district is moving. While I was writing my message, I got teary-eyed a few times thinking of all the great teachers we have here who work tirelessly every day with at-risk youth. It isn't always easy, but it isn't about easy – it is about where you are needed and can make a difference.

I was also invited to speak at Alger Middle School for March Reading Month. Principal Brown, whom I worked with at Ottawa for many years, planned an open house where parents, students, and teachers could reflect on reading. I have to admit, when I was first asked to present on this topic, I wasn't sure how to go about it. I thought about the importance of reading in my life and how it helped me be successful. I decided to present the various stages of my life reading - from a small child to how I use reading now in my professional and personal life. As I told my story, I added some real eye-opening statistics about literacy. I tried to find powerful statistics that would make all people attending think about how important reading is during all stages of life.

After my presentation, I had a wonderful response! I was given many hugs, great comments, and a couple of adults who said that my message touched them and even made them tear up. I was speechless. I just wanted to let my passion for reading and learning in my life show, and it made me realize that a person can talk on any topic if she truly "feels" it. My favorite part occurred after I finished my presentation when seven students out of the eight, who were sitting at a table all evening with books (never touching them), each immediately picked up a book. That put the biggest smile on my face! I was invited back to give the presentation again to a larger group with more schools being invited, and I look forward to it.

This was definitely a really busy month for me, but also very exciting as I am getting to share my story and message with others. Next month, I am looking forward to my trip to Washington, D.C., with the National Teacher of the Year Program, where my highlight will be meeting the President!